



The Education Station is designed as a pull-out section of resources and information for archaeology educators

Historical Archaeology Meshes Learning Experiences For Kids

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Historical archaeologists study cultures that used written words to share information and knowledge. Historical archaeology thus exposes students to a variety of research experiences because they deal not only with material items but also with contemporaneous written sources. Working with such documents as maps, census records, biographies, diaries, and death certificates enables students to view the past from various perspectives that can either corroborate or challenge material evidence.

This additional source of data offers many advantages to scholars but also many challenges. One advantage is the ability to date lives, events, and artifacts fairly precisely. In general, radiocarbon dating after A.D. 1500 has a plus-or-minus accuracy of about 50 years; written records often can pinpoint dates more closely. Another is the insight that eyewitness accounts offer about intangible behaviors such as emotion or motivations behind actions. Yet another is the systematic evidence of social and economic conditions provided by statistics in such sources as census rolls.

But these forms of evidence are not without their drawbacks. Until the time of mass education, those who could write were in the minority; hence, the perspective or intent of some written material may reflect a narrow band in the social spectrum. Thus, when reading historic materials, one needs to ask several questions: Who wrote the document? What was their background? When and why did they write it? Who was their intended audience? What else was taking place (i.e., social or political events) when the document was written? Students must be aware of factors that influenced written evidence, and they must be taught bias-detecting techniques. A common method—applicable for some, but not all, documents—is to ask students to skim the reading material to determine perspective and views, and then to read topic sentences from

various sections to determine the outline of the author's argument. Further reading will reveal whether the author provided evidence to support his or her case.

Students are challenged to develop a variety of skills as they address different kinds of historical evidence. One example concerns the analytical tools used by art historians. Because art often records how a culture perceives itself, students should be familiar with artistic movements, works of individual artists, canons of symbols used in the art of various cultures, and techniques of various art mediums.

Legal documents also offer unique challenges and opportunities for learning about a culture. To deal properly with legal documents, students must become familiar with political and legal organizations within a culture and be aware of various jurisdictions, roles within these structures, and their evolution over time. Legal documents also indicate the values of a society and the level of complexity of relationships, offering an excellent basis for drawing parallels to modern times.

Statistics provided in birth, death, and census records—or even in a telephone book—give a wide-ranging glimpse into social structure, health, women's issues, and immigration. Techniques for dealing with statistics enable students to expand and apply mathematical and analytical skills. Narratives, diaries, and journals also offer opportunities for students to explore the microcosm of history. Again applying bias-detecting techniques, students can consider sources contemporary to past events and enrich their perceptions of a culture, an individual, or a point in time.

Historical archaeology offers students exciting opportunities to experience the past not only through artifacts but also with the added dimension of written evidence. Viewed with material remains, written evidence helps one, as R. G. Collingwood said, to "imaginatively recreate the past."